Aprenn

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/11579727.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV), Hannibal Lecter Series - All Media Types
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Minor Will Graham/OMC
Characters:	Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham, Winston (Hannibal), Beau Graham, OMC
Additional Tags:	post pauvre bete
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Pauvre Bete
Stats:	Published: 2017-07-22 Completed: 2024-08-12 Words: 10,529 Chapters: 5/5

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Summary

Will sells his house. There's nothing there for him anymore. There's no reason to stay. There is a young woman in town who owns acres of dry farmland that she has converted into a dog rescue, and he leave his dogs with her. She promises if he ever comes home he can take them back, but by the look in his eye he can tell she knows he's never coming back.

Chapter 1

Will sells his house. There's nothing there for him anymore. There's no reason to stay. There is a young woman in town who owns acres of dry farmland that she has converted into a dog rescue, and he leave his dogs with her. She promises if he ever comes home he can take them back, but by the look in his eye he can tell she knows he's never coming back. The morning he is supposed to bring them to the rescue, he spends hours carefully putting each dog in their travel kennels, but before that he brings each one to him by the collar and just holds them.

He buries his face in Sugar's big ruff, and remembers doing the same the night he found out about Hannibal. He scrunches his fingers in his thick black fur, and remembers Beau sitting beside him and telling him everything will be ok. Sugar lopes into his box with a careless kind of energy that makes Will's heart hurt. He doesn't realise this is the last time he'll ever see Will. Angel pads into her kennel next, but he catches her before she gets too far. She rolls onto her back and presents her belly and Will pets her. He remembers the feeling of Gideon's hands around his waist, the slight swell of his belly against his lower back. He erases the feeling by burying his hands into Angel's fur.

Winston won't get into his kennel. The rest of the dogs are packed in, Buster is still howling loud enough to wake the dead, but Winston won't move. He sits on the buckled wood of Will's porch and watches, but he won't budge, no matter what Will does. He leaves him there, drives the rest of the dogs to Angela's rescue. He opens each kennel and watches each dog bound out into the grass before he realises he won't need the kennels either. He gives them to Angela. She'll have more use for them than he will.

When he comes home, Winston is still sitting on the porch. His car feels achingly empty, but it's nothing compared to the house. He has one more night to stay here before he has to vacate. There's a writer who bought the house, a young woman with waist length black hair who wants a quiet cabin in the woods to write her novels. He doesn't know how to tell her that though the land is quiet, no roads or neighbours, the house screams. Beau's heavy bootsteps, the clicking and pads of happy dogs, the ring of a cell phone with a murder, the dripping of the kitchen tap that he never got around to fixing. It's so loud, and so empty with only him and Winston. He leaves the key under the mat and sleeps in his car in a parking lot. He's awoke at 6 am by Winston barking at a cop who raps on his door with his flashlight and tells him to move on. It's time to leave.

He doesn't know where to go. His impulse is to go to Louisiana, but why? His family is dead. There's nobody there for him. He goes anyway. He sleeps in his car during the day and drives at night. There's no reason for it, other than he can't make himself wake up when he's supposed to. He doesn't eat usually, but when he does he eats so much he feels sick. He doesn't shower or wash as much as he should.

He spends most of his time driving with one hand and holding Winston with the other. He supposes he's depressed. He ends up on a stretch of dirty, sandy land that overlooks the ocean. It's technically in Plaquemine, but nobody really owns it. He rents a trailer from an old man named Henderson who spits when he talks, and whose words whistle through a gap

in his front teeth. He is distant, but kind, and he takes cash for the trailer and doesn't ask too many questions. He pretends not to like animals, but when he thinks Will isn't looking, he pets Winston's downy head gently.

He's there for the better part of a week, eating from the McDonalds in town, and fishing for dinner, before he musters up the strength to go to the grocery store. Winston's food is running low. There's a Walmart in the nearest town, so he goes and picks up food he hasn't eaten since he was a child. Spaghetti-O's, and Lucky Charms, and gallons of soda. He doesn't buy alcohol. He doesn't quite trust himself yet. He loads up his cart with pretzels and Butterfingers, frozen pizza, and ice cream, and then he goes home and remembers he doesn't have a freezer anymore.

It's another week before he is approached by the closest thing to a neighbour he has. He's a short, funny man with a crooked nose who introduces himself as Jackson. He's as small as Will, but wider, black as good ink, his hair cropped close to his head like he shaves it himself. Jackson lives in the trailer that matches Will's. But while Will's trailer sits under a tree, tight against the shore, Jackson's is near the brackish water way back, too close to the swamp.

Jackson likes Winston, and Winston likes him, and whenever he is close to the trailer Winston howls up a storm, scratching at the door and barking to get out to see him. Will has rarely seen Winston look so puppyish, but then, he supposes Jackson is the kind of man who tends to make people silly. Jackson comes over one night, with a bottle of Jack and beignets and when Will declines the Jack, he stashes it in his backpack and apologises with a thick Louisianian accent.

"It's fine, I'm not-like, an alcoholic or anything. I'm just taking a break right now," Will says. It's the longest sentence he's ever said to Jackson.

"A break from alcohol?" Jackson asks, and Will shrugs.

"A break from everything," Jackson says, then. Will pours them both soda, instead. They sit on the tiny, ramshackle porch that leads off Will's front door and drink their Cokes.

"If I had to guess," Jackson says, and Will rolls his glass between his hands. He doesn't want to drink it. He's been eating badly, for too long, and it's starting to catch up with him, he feels shitty, all of the time.

"I would say you're on the run," Jackson continues. Will laughs.

"From what?"

"Cops? Nah… you are a cop, ain't you?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know you still swing your right arm wide when you walk? Like you compensating for a gun that ain't there anymore. You used to be a cop, right? So, I don't think you're on the run

from them."

"Then who am I running from?" Will asks, just to amuse himself. He hadn't known he still swung wide. Big tell.

"I would say… You still got a little accent. A lil Creole," Jackson says. "It comes out more when you talk to other people with an accent. I'd say you were runnin' from daddy, but you a little old to still be hiding." He says, and he puts his hand on Will's thigh. The night is so dark, the silver of the moon casts a blue tone over his skin. Will's looks like flawed marble next to it, pink and pale. It's a handsome contrast, the soft darkness of his hand on Will's pale knee. His hand is pleasantly warm. Will doesn't move it.

"My dad is dead," Will says.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Don't be," Will says, and Jackson squeezes his leg gently, affectionately. It feels absurd, common. Regular, to be sitting here, drinking, and watching the lightening bugs buzz on the swamp. He still has the taste of beignets in his mouth, the sugar from the warm Coke settling on his teeth.

It's not bad. He could see this. He's getting a little work from the locals, repairing their motors. Mostly boats, but the occasional lawnmower, car. He could stay here. Jackson brings him food 'most every time he comes over, some beignets, sometimes gator on a stick, sometimes molasses candy. Will's been making friends with the grizzled old woman who owns the boat rental store out near the bayou, and she's been talking a lot about bringing him in to work. He doesn't move Jackson's hand off his thigh. Winston, full on beignets, and gator, dozes at their feet, his head resting on Jackson's big work boots.

The weather turns quick and the cold seeps into the trailer fast. Jackson says he's got a leak in his roof, so he spends a night sleeping on the couch in the main room in Will's trailer. Will lays on his lumpy mattress, and listens to Jackson's little snore.

Will doesn't think there's a leak, but Jackson hasn't done anything since the time they sat out on the porch together, with cheap sugar on his fingers, and Winston on his feet, and Jackson's hand on his knee. He listens to Jackson breathing, slow and steady like a train, and he thinks. They both wake late the next morning, and when he comes out Jackson has made him a mug of coffee, sweet and hot, and Will says:

"Maybe you shouldn't go home today. Prolly be rainin' awhile. No point in you goin' getting dripped on."

They make gumbo together. When the smell and steam is thick and sweaty in the trailer they open the front door and sit on the door saddle together, watching the hot rain splash on the bayou.

"So," Jackson says, and Winston perks up at the sound of his voice, pads over to them. They're pressed close enough together that when Winston lies on his side, his back jammed into their backs, his spine draws a long line between them.

“Abusive spouse is my guess,” Jackson says. The gumbo is starting to bubble a little in the pot. Will should get up, turn it down to a simmer but he’s warm.

“What is it, your husband beat you?” Jackson says, and Will likes how direct he is.

“My husband’s in prison,” Will says. He doesn’t know why he calls Hannibal his husband, except that he does. He’s not going to call Hannibal anything else, anything lesser.
Even if Hannibal isn’t there to listen.

“Did he beat you? That’s why you ran?” Jackson asks. Winston is hot against his lower back, Jackson is hot against his side. The cheap metal siding of the doorframe is cold against his other side, but he sweats against that too.

“He never hit me,” Will says.

“Why’s he in prison then?”

“He killed my dad,” Will says.

“Hmm,” Jackson replies. “How you feel about that?”

“I don’t,” Will says. “I don’t feel about that.”

Jackson sleeps on the couch again that night. He borrows a clean shirt from Will, and dozes on his couch in his borrowed shirt and boxers. Will lies awake again, and listens to him breathe. He doesn’t snore. The rain is like hot metal, beating against the trailer roof, hammering and dripping.

It’s so dark. There are no stars here, he can’t see them from the trailer. The trees block his view or the sky, block the moonlight. Jackson comes into his bed, and lies down beside him like he belongs there.

“This ok?” He asks, and Will feels like a married man, lying on his back with his regular, working class spouse lying beside him.

“I guess,” Will says. He can see his life differently from this angle, he can see how this would go. He’d work at the boat shop, fixing motors in the evenings to keep them afloat. Jackson’d keep his job at the Walmart and come home sweating and sore and bored.

They’d cobble together just enough cash to keep on living, and they’d eat gumbo in the winter, and gator in the summer, and in the evenings they’d sit on the porch and watch the fireflies over the swamp and they’d die together in this trailer, content, but nothing more. Jackson moves in beside him, and holds him. Will lets him.

“I said earlier that my husband killed my daddy,” Will says. “That isn't true.”

“I know,” Jackson whispers. It makes Will want to whisper too, this quiet, content little bubble in this hot little trailer. “Doesn't matter.”

“He wasn’t a good man,” Will says, and he’s not sure if he’s talking about Beau, or Hannibal.

“I figured,” Jackson whispers. He sounds sleepy. His accent is thicker like this, so is Will's. “It don’t matter. Not if you did what needed to be done.”

Will is angled to his side, his back slightly turned to him, so Jackson’s hips are pressed right up against his ass. Jackson is petting his thigh gently, the pale skin that his boxers usually hide.

It’s been a very long time since Will’s been hard. Even longer since he’s had sex. Months, months for both. Every time he thought about it, which was rare enough, he just couldn’t. Why bother? His sexuality feels so divorced from his body. He supposes he’s used to trying to forget it.

He’s used to being so very platonic, as platonic as he can be around Beau that he doesn’t know how not to be anymore. When he tries to think sexy, even if it’s just him, just on his own, he feels stupid, slutty, tempting danger. He doesn’t know what to do now. It feels good, it feels safe, but it’s nothing more.

He’s getting hard, slowly, with every slow drag of Jackson’s strong hand on his thigh. He slips his fingers down when Will doesn’t protest, parts his legs and touches the soft stretch of skin high up on the sensitive inside of his thigh, his knuckles dragging the material of his boxers back and forth slowly.

“Do you want me to stop?” Jackson asks when Will doesn’t respond.

“‘No,” Will says. “But I don’t want you to die, either.” Jackson’s hand slows and stops, and Will swallows.

“Your husband-”

“He isn’t a good man,” Will says. “Neither am I. I don’t want you to die.”

He knows what he’s doing. He does it anyway. Jackson leaves, and he doesn’t come back again, and Will sits at home, with one shirt less.

Chapter 2

He listened to Johnny Cash on the sagging door saddle. Something about *Orange Blossom Special* had been calling to him since he woke up, late in the morning. He rolled out of his spiny bed, the springs digging into the softening parts of his body and then stopped, abruptly. His body had called out for *It Ain't Me, Babe*, and so he played it loudly on the shitty old record player that was hotglued to the counter. The music seems to rattle in his stomach, rolling in and curling up under his ribs, feeling too big for his tiny life. Like a freight train nestled under his ribcage.

He replayed the song and stood. He wrestled the door to the bathroom open, the drooping wood scratching over the threadbare carpet unpleasantly. He found himself in front of the only big mirror in the trailer, and he looked, for a long time. His hair was dirty, ratty. Too long. He hadn't shaved in too long, either, his stubble was growing into a thick beard, patchy around his chapped lips. The song ended, and *The Wall* started, and he went to change it before he could think too hard about it. He put on *At Folsom Prison* instead and skipped ahead to *Cocaine Blues.*

When he went back into the bathroom, he stripped naked and dumped his clothes in the trashcan. He took his electric razor, suppressing a shiver at the familiar buzz, and he shaved his head. The vibration tingled his scalp, and he felt like he was waking up. He shaved his beard entirely, getting rid of the stubble he had nursed for so long. When he was bald, only stubble on his head, and a bare face, he climbed into the tub and washed himself. The chubbiness around his stomach and thighs was new, it wasn't a healthy fat, or a pleasant roundedness, but rather the result of staying in one place for too long, and eating little but sugar.

He scrubbed himself down, and climbed out of the tub. Now that he was clean he could smell the filth of his clothes, and he couldn't remember the last time he had changed. He dumped them entirely and pulled fresh t-shirts from a pack. He slipped into track pants and laced up his old running shoes. Before he left the trailer, he turned off the record player, cutting off *I Still Miss Someone,* and went for a run.

When he came back he smelled of sweat, but a clean, fresh kind from hard work. He showered again, and ate, pulling out eggs and bread and making a quick meal. He didn't want to be too late, so he ate quickly, and drank water. The food and water felt like nourishment, rather than comfort. It didn't sit heavy like a ball in his stomach like his usual diet did. He washed his dishes, and went to get ready.

He had picked up new jeans in town, that he slipped into now. He had also picked up a new script. He had been far too lax with his normal prescription, and the doctor in town had insisted on a different one. He didn't mind too much. The doctor had examined the paperwork he had gotten Alana to send through. The doctor, a shaky older white woman with thinning brown hair had told him he was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Major Depressive Disorder. She told him that she agreed with his diagnoses and firmly

insisted on him making another appointment in two weeks to check up on his new medication.

He wrote it down on a scrap of paper and taped it to his fridge to remind himself. After he had taken his meds, he finished dressing, and went to brush his hair before remembering it was gone. He scrubbed his hand over his stubbled head instead. Before he left, he put out paper and a pen on the little table to remind him to write when he got home.

The club was unbelievably loud. He hadn't been in one in so many years he had forgotten how hard it was. So loud, and over-stimulating on the senses. He wanted to leave. He wanted to go home and eat the Jolly Ranchers left in his cupboard, and crawl into bed and sleep for too many hours. The drive had been so long, though. The closest gay club was almost three hours away from his trailer.

Instead, he went to the bathroom and locked himself in a stall to catch his breath. The smell was thick with bleach and the quiet couple locked in the next stall. He wanted a drink. The couple was so quiet that he felt like he was intruding. Somehow, it would have been better if they had grunted, banged against the wall, moaned. Instead there was just the quiet, rhythmic sound of their mingled breathing.

He wanted a whiskey, but he couldn't drink too much alcohol with his SSRI, and he didn't trust himself to be able to limit. Instead, he pushed up the sleeves of his white shirt, and went out into the club. It heaved, like some huge breathing thing, undulating and shaking in the stuttering lights. He didn't want to dance.

He stood, like some mute animal near the wall. It dripped down his back, condensate dampening his shirt. It didn't take too long before a man approached him. Will looked over him appraisingly, young, average height, slender, white, handsome in an entitled way. His blonde hair was long enough that his hair framed his face prettily. He had a French accent, and Will smiled at him, which seemed to relieve him.

"I'm Pierre," he said, almost too quiet too hear. "Could I buy you a drink?"

"No," Will said, and Pierre's ears twitched. He pursed his full lips slightly and gave a sweet little half shrug, as though he hadn't really expected a different answer. It was entirely an affect. Will liked it. It was blatantly false, impossible to believe.

"I'm Will," he said, before Pierre turned away, his pretended humbleness attractive in a strange way. "I don't really drink. Are you here alone?"

Pierre nodded then, fidgeting his fingers in the sleeves of his black shirt. It was perfectly tailored, just a touch too loose to cling to his skin, made to draw the eye for a closer look.

"Are y-" Pierre started and Will stood up abruptly.

"Do you wanna fuck me?" He asked, and Pierre blinked at him.

“Yeah,” he said, cautiously. “Do you wanna come home with me?”

“Sure,” Will said, putting his glass down on the closest table. “Just let me get my coat.”

Pierre’s house was beautiful. He led him through a wide open hall, with a grand staircase, into a large living room, painted pale cream. Empty enough that Will could tell he was renting, but the generic art had been replaced with good pieces, mostly white and gold. He touched the mane of a tall, slender lion stature, and his fingertips trailed warmth over the gold. Pierre slipped in behind him, smiling genially.

“Can I get you something to drink?” He offered. He slipped off his own jacket first, throwing it on the back of his couch. Will observed it with faint curiosity.

“No,” he said, pulling his own coat off, and laying it near Pierre’s. “I’m ok.”
Pierre approached him then, all false shyness and swift fingers. He cupped Will’s jaw, his fingers hot enough to brand, and he turned his head toward him, placing a small kiss on Will’s closed mouth.

“Is this ok?” Pierre asked, and Will tilted his head slightly, to open his mouth more to him. He let his hands come up, holding Pierre’s neck. His thumbs rested over the sensitive softness under his Adam’s apple. He could feel the pulse, rabbiting on swiftly.

“If I said no?” Will asked, and Pierre chuckled, dropping his hands to Will’s belt loops to pull him into him.

“Look me in the eye right now and tell me you wanna leave and I’ll let you,” he said.

Will let himself be pulled forward, until they both fell onto the couch. Pierre spread Will’s thighs, settled him on his lap and grinned.

“I want to leave,” Will said, and Pierre bit his jaw, gentle enough not to mark. Will still felt it there, his saliva wet and cooling on his freshly shaved skin.

“I don’t believe you,” Pierre whispered, his hands dropping down to Will’s ass, squeezing with a propriety that irritated him.

“Ok,” Will said. It took surprisingly little pressure. His thumbs were already in the right spot, his fingers curling around Pierre’s throat. Will snapped his neck quickly, Pierre’s long blonde hair swinging around as his head was wrenched. He was dead so swiftly that he didn’t realize it, his head flopping on his broken neck with a disturbing looseness, his face still arranged in a teasing flirty expression. Will climbed off of him and went to the other seat and watched him for a long time.

The cleanup didn’t take very long, Will wiped him down, cleaned under his fingernails carefully. Then dragged his body to the bottom of the stairs. Before he left, he scrubbed down the door handles, the lion head, everywhere he had touched, and then he got into his car and drove home to write to Hannibal.

Hannibal,

I've missed your cooking. I've tried to replicate it, but I don't have your propensity for meat. It feels wasteful to cook for one. I know you would have disagreed with that, before. You always insisted that a meal for one is an important as a meal for many. But after we met, did you ever cook for just yourself and think of what a pity it was that there was no one else there to enjoy it with?

Love,

W

Chapter 3

Dearest Will,

I was pleasantly surprised to receive your letter. Neither Jack nor Alana seemed to know quite where you had disappeared to. I believe they worried that you had done something irreversible, and stupid. I never did. I had always thought you would run. It has always been a talent. A skill you've honed over the years, isn't it? I hope you're well, and recovering. The death of a parent can be an ugly thing. I hope it has not made you ugly.

It is quiet here. The good Doctor Chilton allows me some music, but at scheduled times, of course. I imagine it is quiet where you are, as well. I think you ran, like a rabbit, and you found yourself a small, dark burrow to nestle yourself into. Do you feel warm, Will? Do you still walk out of your home at night and look back at your burrow, all bright, and think of a ship at sea?

Does it still make you feel safe to walk into the darkness, just so you can truly see the light? I wonder. When I think of you now, I imagine you in some sweating, Southern hovel with work-hard hands and a reclaimed accent on your tongue. Have you found some new love to ruin, yet? I was perhaps most surprised that you trusted me enough to send me a return address. I know it is only a rented post office box, but a man can do much with a city.

Tell me, Will. Do you still sleep with the lights on?

Yours faithfully,

Hannibal.

Will crumples the edge of the letter in his hand, and only pulls it back in time to avoid destroying the whole thing. He *hates* so abruptly and viciously that it feels like a gnawing, empty pain, like hunger. Before he can think much more about it, he snatches a piece of paper, and smooths the edges violently. He scrawls across it, a furious slash of pen:

His name is Jackson.

He claws through a drawer. Takeout menus and useless scraps of paper fly out as he grabs an envelope. A long receipt lifts in the wind, and folds itself over the edge of the drawer, a papery ribbon resting on the wood. He has the note stuffed into the envelope before he changes his mind. He rips it into small pieces, fluttering to the ground and lying on the thin carpet.

They are not even, he realizes abruptly, and it's strange to step back into the thoughts of the man he used to be. The cosmic scales are not balanced here, because Hannibal doesn't and will not see what he did to Will as callous manipulation.

But he is still interested.

He would not have written if he had wanted to maintain a distance. He doesn't see his insidious conmanship as Will used to, as a cold, devious interest as sterile as a cannula.

What Hannibal thinks he would like, Will realizes, is for Will to debase himself, and be humiliated for the revenge he wreaked upon Hannibal. But even Hannibal knows that this would not satisfy him for long, and so Will cannot accept it.

There is no world in which he can see himself, as he currently is and as he wants to be, groveling to Hannibal to beg forgiveness. What he did was righteous, and wrong, and it is this dual nature that has still entrapped Hannibal's curiosity.

Hannibal will want his revenge, and if he is the man Will thinks he is; he will want forgiveness for both himself, and Will's past crimes. He is hurt, yes, bleeding and wounded, but he is still caught, strung through the lip with metal. He expects pain, but he has not turned away.

In the most simple terms; Will thinks, Hannibal wants to see what he will do next.

It had been a long two days of driving, and Will is still stiff from the car. He had stopped in Knoxville to eat and change his clothes on the way here, but hadn't gotten a motel room. Too easy.

He had instead driven about three hours out of his way to go to a motel in Myrtle Beach. He stole a matchbook, and drove to the hospital where Hannibal has been kept under observation, awaiting his trial.

Hannibal does not speak when he sees Will, but rather turns his head away very slightly, as a dog to a bad meal. Bizarrely, it is this visible rejection that gives Will the concrete spirit to sit on the tiny folding chair that Frederick Chilton had directed an orderly to place in front of Hannibal's enclosure. Hannibal's nose twitches minutely when Will sits, and he is buoyed by this physical tell, this hint of a true lack of rejection.

'Hello, Hannibal,' Will says eventually. There is a barely audible click in the hallway, as though a camera has just turned on and he rolls his eyes at Frederick's audacity. Hannibal would never usually have ignored a direct greeting from anyone else, but he does not even lift his eyes to look at Will, his nose elevated in the air. He is thinner that Will has seen him before. His haircut is not particularly flattering.

Will takes Hannibal's silence as invitation to test him. He stands and approaches the glass on Hannibal's enclosure and sinks his hands into his pockets.

'Hannibal, speak to me,' Will says, and Hannibal abruptly turns his head.

'I am not a dog to be ordered to your wishes, Will,' Hannibal says, and the words are harsh, dual-meaning, but his tone is cold. Will lifts a hand to scrub at his own head, a quick and false gesture of nervousness, and as he pulls his hand from his pocket, the matchbook falls. He blinks at it for a moment before he stands on it, bends and grabs it. He ducks his head and

shoves it back deep in his pocket. Hannibal has stood, and his gaze had fixed on the name of the motel.

Brusquely, Hannibal says: 'You cut your hair off.'

Will chews his thumbnail, and doesn't like how Hannibal has phrased it. He has deliberately inserted the final word to make the action sound more graphic, more violent. One cuts their hair, but rarely *off*, one rather cuts a limb off.

"I shaved my head," he says instead. He had never done it himself before, when he was small his father cut his hair, and when he was a teenager his father trimmed his hair, and shaved his head once, but Will has never cut his own hair. He doesn't want to explain why he did, but he thinks Hannibal knows, and it is this that makes him say:
"I was depressed. So I decided to start anew."

He does not want Hannibal to think of his depression as a cold grey sadness, all knobby knees and skinny wrists, skipping meals and watching the rain fall solemnly. Hannibal must take him seriously, Hannibal should think of the disgusting parts of depression. Will must display the dirty bedsheets, and unwashed dishes, the sugar-laden comfort foods, the lack of showers. Hannibal must know what he has chosen to co-create. Will will not allow him to romanticise it. Hannibal has spent far too much of their relationship romanticising Will.

"I was too depressed to get out of bed some days," Will says. "My hair was dry and knotty, frizzy. Gross," he says, and Hannibal's face shows the slightest twitch, not the wrinkle of the nose like Will was expecting, but a subtle rounding of the eyes. Hannibal is listening intently. This is unexpected.

"Grief is a common side-effect of depression," Hannibal says. Will takes the bait, as he would have ignored it before.

"I would have said my depression was a side-effect of my grief," he proposes. Hannibal inclines his head slightly. A fine lock of hair slips free of the rest, falls forward and brushes over Hannibal's forehead. It is so soft and silky that Will does not think Hannibal notices it.

But he does, and he lifts his hand and brushes it back into place with a casual turn of the wrist and Will abruptly wants something he cannot name. Such a human, minuscule gesture, and in any other person Will would ignore it. But it is Hannibal, and it is as decisive and reflexive as anything Hannibal has ever done.

He is not immortal, Will realises, and such a silly thing to not have thought of before. Hannibal is, as all humans are, an endless slave to his instincts. He rationalises better and less than most people do. He needs less self-convincing of his own righteousness, since he has carved out his own morality of the world. It is easier for him to slide into the greys of the world, and becomes easier every time he does it. Will had thought he'd made a decision, but he is suddenly struck by a deeper understanding.

The question is not, and has never been if he loves Hannibal. He should not have battled with the idea of murder as art, the concept of aligning himself with evil. He already is. The question will always be whether he and Hannibal are one. Hannibal thinks of himself as a

god, and Will thinks of himself as wholly, fully human. Neither of them are divine, but there is a rounded kind of holiness in the fullness of humanity. Hannibal may think he is a god, but Will may be the only person in the world to see him as human.

“I believe you grieve not for your father, but yourself,” Hannibal says softly.

“Lazy,” Will chastises, and Hannibal laughs. The spread of joy across his face is infectious and Will can’t help but to grin at him.

“Perhaps,” Hannibal allows, spreading his hands delicately, as though he is holding a small world between his fingers. “But still true.”

Will concedes to this, and as banal as it sounds, Hannibal is right. Will has mourned more for his own morality, and childhood and self than he has for any death. Will has always been selfish. He has not changed.

It’s time to decide if he wants to die a self-centred man, alone and tired and forgotten or if he wants to claim his half of Hannibal’s stolen divinity.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

shows up 7 months late with starbucks hey whats up

Will awakes with a start, a rough and sharp entrance to a greyish morning. His inner arms still tingle, blood rushing through the tiny pathways in his body; he can feel the terror leaving him slowly. The fear from his dream drips away, slowly but surely leeches into the bedlinen of his hotel room.

He hasn't screamed himself awake, and he's thankful for this. He has neighbours now, for all intents and purposes, people sleeping easily in rooms either side of his. The dream sticks with him though, as thick and morose as black honey. He doesn't know what time it is, but it's early enough that the sun is beginning to burn off the fog from the night.

The pillow is cold and rough beneath his head, cheap linens scratching the stubble on his scalp. He doesn't want to go back to sleep; he doesn't want to get up, he is only struck with the sudden painful heart-swallowing longing of loneliness. That human ache in the chest, and swelling burn of tears behind the eyes that indicates a terrible swathe of fear.

He doesn't want to be alone. The dream flickers behind his eyelids when he blinks; but it's not fair to call it a dream, what it really is is a memory. Most children want to call out for a parent after a nightmare. Will has never had a mother to call out to in the night, small and trembling after kid-nightmares, but sometimes the fear of the mythical outweighed the fear of the human, and he would call out for his father.

Bitterly, with the chafing polyester of hotel sheets entwined around his thighs, a night's stubble flecking his jaw, he wants nothing more than to be a child again, one who could call for his daddy in the dead of night. When the nightmares were nothing more than bad dreams, and there was nothing more comforting that the rough work-calloused hands of his daddy patting his thin shoulders and pulling him absently into a hug.

"It's the brain's way of getting rid of all the bad shit," Beau had told him, again and again, when Will's nightmares were at their worst. Will hadn't understood at the time, he'd shaken his head, curls bouncing back up from where they had been flattened by sleep. Beau had sighed gently, readjusted Will on his lap. The bed had creaked ominously under the combined weight of them both, like it might break, but Daddy hadn't seemed to care, therefore it wasn't worth caring about.

“All that bad stuff you can’t deal with during the day, the mind just gets all that out in dreams, so it can’t hurt you. It’s like a poultice, get it?”

Will didn’t, but at the mention of a poultice his brows had furrowed and he had remembered a time before. He had cut his upper thigh jumping a fence. A skinny flap of wire mesh, leaning off the edge of the fence post had stuck him badly, jabbing a deep incision into his upper thigh. He’d crisscrossed two band-aids over it like Daddy had shown him and forgotten about it, but a few days later it hadn’t healed; it had grown hot and red, and the big muscle in his thigh had felt stiff, like he’d walked for miles.

Daddy had been so angry when he’d seen it, and he’d made Will sit facing him, his injured leg propped up on Daddy’s thigh and he’d made a bread and milk poultice. It had been burning hot the first time, but Daddy had been right, it had drawn all the yellowish gunk from deep within and brought it to the surface so he could wipe it away. It was fascinating, in a faintly shameful way, to see the poison his body had made being drawn up and cleaned out.

He understood abruptly what Daddy had meant. The dreams were nothing but dreams, nothing but poison his body had made, ready to be wiped away. *Okay,* he remembered thinking.

But it had been so much easier when he could sit up in bed, offer a trembling *daddy?* and be quite assured by the sound of heavy steps coming up the hall to him, work-rough hands ready to pet and the low vibrations of a quiet voice rumbling through a strong chest to soothe. It had been easier. He couldn’t have been older than eight, or nine, in these memories he’s small and Beau picked him up as easily as a kitten. It was far too early for him to start looking like Ella, and too early still for that illness in either of his parents to start to fester.

Quixotically, when he had most desired company, Will had isolated himself. He had crawled into his little Wolf Trap houses, surrounded by good dogs, and convinced himself he didn’t mind being alone; in fact, he preferred it. So much easier. Will had always been excellent at fooling himself into thinking things weren’t so bad, and so he did it again this night, he flipped his pillow over, as though that would refresh the slate for his dreams. He fell into an uneasy rest, cold and alone, and he dreamed he was in Hannibal’s house.

“I find it curious you joining me in the kitchen. You have never cooked with me before,” Hannibal says in the dream, and Will opens his mouth automatically to object. Hannibal spots him and acquiesces. “Chopped herbs, cut tomatoes, stirred sauces, yes, you have assisted me and greatly so. But you have never helped me prepare or cook the meat before.”
The open kitchen smells wonderful, the warm woody scent of the whiskey Hannibal hands him mingles beautifully with the rising smoke of seared meat. Will is almost too warm, and he has a smear of soot on his inner arm from lighting the fire. He licks the soot reflexively and rubs it away while Hannibal watches.

“I had never helped butcher before either,” Will says, dryly, and Hannibal inclines his head in agreement. “Have you ever cooked with anyone else?”

“A small number of people. Alana, Bedelia, mostly friends-” Hannibal starts as though he is going to continue so Will interrupts him, because he doesn’t want to know. He already regrets asking. Instead of listening, he reaches out, touches Hannibal’s lower back and dips under his shirt. He strokes the warmth of his fingertips over Hannibal’s skin.

“Nobody who knew what you were actually cooking?” Will presses, and Hannibal looks at him as though he knows precisely the direction of Will’s thoughts.

The corners of Hannibal’s mouth quirk up, and he doesn’t restrain it. “Are you jealous?”

“Jealous? Of what?” Will scoffs. His whiskey has changed, to a mug filled with something warm, and the kitchen has blurred in that dream-way, they are no longer in the *Before,* in Hannibal’s Baltimore house, but in some undetermined *After.* The house has become a cabin. He buries his nose into the steam from the wide open mouth of his favoured mug.

Will understands with some innate dream-knowledge that when they move, it is always Hannibal who packs up the equipment in the kitchen. Will prefers to watch him, and Hannibal enjoys being watched. Hannibal carefully packs this plain mug, Will has watched him softly layer the thick, cheap porcelain in expensive linens, and gently place in the box next to his own bone china. He carries the boxes to the car and places them in the trunk with something only slightly short of reverence. Hannibal packs the kitchen, and Will always packs their studies. He knows how to organise Hannibal’s books and journals better than Hannibal knows he likes. Hannibal prefers to have a lot of space, and Will sees no reason for them to limit themselves.

“The intimacy of preparing a meal with and for another,” Hannibal says. He goes to wash his hands, and his sleeve unfolds slightly, slipping downwards toward the water. Will captures it before it gets damp and rolls it back upward. Hannibal’s skin is very warm, the hair on his arm is fine and soft. Will fastens the sleeve to its rightful place neatly.

“Thank you,” Hannibal whispers, and Will can feel the faint warmth of his breath move his hair.

“When you were young, did you imagine yourself in love with someone?” Hannibal asked abruptly. It feels suddenly like it may be snowing outside, the fine yellow morning has slipped smoothly into a wintry evening, velvet blue sky and white snow bouncing moonlight into the kitchen. At Will’s curious look, he continued. “I ask only because it was never something I dreamed of, or longed for. I can’t imagine it was much different for you. I saw myself as perhaps married, most likely to a neutral but interesting, faceless person. Probably either someone popular in high society, or low from the very dregs. I would imagine it would have been either extreme, simply because that would have made it more interesting for me in the context of the societal circles I choose to move in. I had never longed for another half. I suppose I had simply always thought of myself as whole.”

Will's chest felt too full suddenly, as though it had been filling up like a bath with a dripping faucet, and was perilously close to overflowing. "You use the past tense."

"For obvious reasons," Hannibal says with such an uncharacteristic scoff that Will laughs, and releases the building tension in him.

"You're right, anyway. I never really aimed for it. I just assumed I'd end up married to a nice woman who was very pleasant and maybe mildly funny, and reasonably smart and just very… nice."

"I am not very nice," Hannibal notes and Will laughs again, harder, and snorts. The pleasant warmth of the dream fades slightly as he turns over in bed, but he lapses back into it when he settles under the sheets. In his dream, Hannibal smiles fondly in response.

"You're nice to me," Will points out.

"Occasionally," Hannibal agrees, and Will grabs the waistline of his apron and tugs on it.

"I think I would have married a very nice girl," Will explains, "And we probably would have had a nice little house and maybe a nice baby and I would have blown my brains out with a nice gun before I turned forty."

"Oh, Will," Hannibal sighs. "Please promise me you would never use a gun, darling, they are so wasteful."

Will laughs and unties the neat bow of strings holding up Hannibal's apron. "Just for you, then, if I ever do want to die, I'll ask you, and I won't shoot myself."

"How very thoughtful of you," Hannibal says, agreeably, resting his hands on Will's waist. "At least I would put your body to good use."
Will stops for a moment, and purses his lips, thinking. Hannibal kisses his forehead, as is his wont whenever there is a gap in conversation long enough to excuse it.

"Hannibal... I can't tell if that's a euphemism or -" Will starts, and his voice changes to a tremble as Hannibal shook with restrained laughter. "It's not *funny,* you-"

Hannibal brings his hand up from Will's waist to wipe his own eyes, and Will grins at the sparkle of moisture there.

"Shush, Will," dream-Hannibal says comfortably, and Will sleeps.

Will visits with Hannibal in the afternoon. It has taken him two showers to properly shake the longing of his dreams, he's had to sit silently for a few moments in the car outside the hospital, silently swallowing the pain so he can look normal.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

shows up 6 years late with starbucks hey what's up

When Hannibal sees him, the first thing he says is:

“I’m beginning to wonder if sending me away was some form of self-harm.”

Will scoffs automatically. “I’ve never been prone to self-harm. Self-destruction, debatable, but self-harm, no.”

“There are many different ways to harm yourself, Will. Isolation is one of them.”

“Isolation? I haven’t been isolated,” he says, savagely.

Hannibal looks thinner than usual. He rounds the vintage desk in his glass cage and draws out a chair, hesitates behind if for a moment as though he is bereft at not being able to offer a seat for Will.

“Of course you’re isolated,” Hannibal says firmly, and Will picks at a loose thread on the sleeve of his old jacket just to see Hannibal’s nose wrinkle slightly.

“There is nobody else that you can be yourself with,” Hannibal says, firmly. “You hide most of yourself from those you cannot distance yourself from. Name me a single friend you have who knows your dark thoughts, Will.”

Will knows the answer, but voicing it will give Hannibal the power in the conversation, and he’s still finding his new equilibrium. “I do miss you,” he says instead of answering, because it puts Hannibal on guard, and Will can almost see the words wash over him like a cleansing wave.

“Kind of you to say,” Hannibal says instead, as though Will has delivered a grave insult to him. “But I will try not to be overcome. I’m certain you’ve found someone else to converse with. How is Jackson?”

Will cannot help his smile, so he ducks his head slightly, inclining his chin to his chest. “That was good.”

“You used his name to book the room, Will, it hardly required a powerful level of genius,” Hannibal notes, and there is an undercurrent there too, a live wire of question.

Of course, Hannibal has called the Myrtle Beach motel and clearly had caught the new girl at the desk, the easiest one to manipulate information from. It would have been very simple for him. Had he tried later that same day, the older woman, long-accustomed to her job, would have picked up and perhaps would have told him the truth, that a room was booked for a Jackson, but nobody ever showed up. They had both been lucky. Hannibal was still intrigued, this was the important part.

“Have you been sentenced?” Will asked. “Sorry. I haven’t really been keeping up with the news.”

“I have been arraigned, and there are a number of motions being filed, currently,” Hannibal said. “I believe my lawyer's next step is for me to attend an examination with a neurocriminology specialist to have some neuroimaging done. That is scheduled for the end of the month.”

“I doubt this hospital has the facilities,” Will noted.

“You’re correct,” Hannibal said. “I am to be brought to a lab in Charlottesville, with a number of security guards.”

Of course. Hannibal has an escape plan in place, and it won’t take long. Will isn’t sure if he wants to know the specifics. Instead of thinking about it too hard, he pulls a folded piece of paper out of his inner pocket, the one Barney never remembers to check and holds it flat against the glass separating them. Hannibal looks at the address written on it in Will’s careful hand, and then nods quietly.

“It is good to see you, Will,” he says again, his voice lower and graver. He may be expecting to be killed in his escape, Will realises. For a moment his mouth opens, and an offer to help nearly escapes. Hannibal watches him, his warm eyes red-tinted in these harsh lights, and the sense that Hannibal knows what he had been about to offer washes over him.

“Although you don’t look at all like yourself,” Hannibal says, as though the moment never occurred. To the cameras, Will supposes it didn’t.

“I feel different,” he admitted. That isn’t what Hannibal is talking about, he’s quite sure, but it doesn’t matter. He changes the subject. “I heard there was a man killed in New Orleans. There were some articles online saying the murder was exactly in the manner of the Chesapeake Ripper. Some people are saying it’s a copycat. Or that the Ripper is out there, still killing.”

“What do you think?” Hannibal asks him, intently. The lights about his head flicker briefly, a short blink like the room itself is leaning in closer to listen.

“I think the Ripper is out there,” Will whispers. “He’s free, and he’s ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“To continue,” he says. When the doors close behind him, and the bright sunshine tries to blink away the image of the cell, it can’t bleach it clean. Will still sees Hannibal on the back

of his eyelids, a red-tinted figure in white.

Will goes back to the trailer park, his boots heavy with dew in the scraggly weed grass stuttering up the pathway. He'd heard of desire paths somewhere, lines in the ground drawn by plodding feet with disregard for traditional paving. There is one from the door of his trailer that leads backwards into the rangy clump of skinny trees, beaten into the ground by Winston's paws. There is none between his door and Jackson's trailer. He has to scuffle past the weeds threading up through scattered gravel, to stand at his skinny glass door. When Jackson opens the door, his face is cautious, guarded, as though Will might be armed. He twitches his hands out in an unspoken response, flashing his empty palms. The woods are breathing behind him, the wind whistling through the branches like lonely birds. Before Jackson can speak, still holding his door open with one hand, ready to shut it in defence, Will tells him.

"You need to leave," Will says and Jackson raises one eyebrow in disbelief. "My husband is out of prison. He'll be here soon."

He's methodically chopping carrots, when he hears the car outside. The carrots are a bright, damp and fresh amber colour, beautifully grown. He'd bought them from a tiny farmer's market in the next town over, along with large purple bulbs of garlic, crisp onions so fresh their paper doesn't even crinkle under his grasp. It's dark out, and the headlights of the cop car shine through the windows like an accusation, flashing on every reflective surface in the room.

There aren't many people who live in this trailer park, but the view of a cop car would certainly cause any curious ones to scatter. Will muses over whether that was a deliberate choice or a lack of a choice when He hears footsteps climbing up his gravel path. They're slow, and methodical, and he recognises them. The door is unlocked. Hannibal opens it as though it is his own house, and when he stands in the tiny doorway, and shuts the door behind him, he looks incongruous and strangely large in the confused space. There's a whuffling noise behind Will's feet and Winston pads softly towards the door, his nails clicking on the cheap linoleum. He goes to Hannibal, sniffs at the clothes he wears - an all-white jumpsuit, spattered with blood and grass stains and Hannibal allows him. He lifts the small blue and white cooler out of Winston's reach when he moves towards it, but deigns to place a hand on Winston's head, closer to a pat then a pet. Winston wags his tail, pleased and excited and Will moves first.

They meet at the junction between hallway and kitchen, and Hannibal looks at him.

"You tricked me," he says, and Will's cheeks are aching with the burn of a bitten-back grin. "Jackson was not at that motel."

"You didn't have to go after him," Will reminds him, and Hannibal reaches past him to place the clean cooler on the countertop, an offering. He's struck by an old memory of Hannibal

stepping around his father to bring fresh meat for his dogs, and he's strangely touched by the concept, still echoing through Hannibal. Meat to feed, and to nourish.

"Of course I did," Hannibal says smoothly, low as though he doesn't wish for Will to respond. "But you delayed me. I should have been here earlier. But I had to go to a filthy motel to find a filthy man."

"And did you find him?" Will asks. Hannibal only looks at him, then taps the cooler with one fingertip. Inside something tips to the side, crinkling the butcher paper it must be laying on.

"Open it, Will," Hannibal says, and Will does. It's a cool, blue-veined lump of meat, neatly filleted and skinned. Hannibal looks at him, and then at the vegetables he's been preparing and sighs quietly. He closes the cooler again, gently clicking it shut. It's a cheap thing, and Will can smell the yeasty scent of bread, and in a flash he can see a sandwich, snacks some cop has prepared for a long day at work transferring a killer from hospital to hospital. He can nearly smell the scent of boredom and anxiety on the plastic.

"This is-" He starts, and Hannibal takes the cooler, plucks it open and lets the lump of cop meat fall to the floor. Winston sniffles at it, and looks up at Will with big wet eyes until he nods and then he eats it in great bites, his jaws working powerfully.

"Worthless," Hannibal interrupts him. "This is for him, not us. It is only fit to feed a dog. Where did you send your Jackson?"

"Not that far," Will admits. "But further than he wanted."

He turns back to his vegetables. It's a far cry from Hannibal's usual mise en place, mismatched bowls with produce chopped and peeled so carefully it took him three times as long as it would take Hannibal. Hannibal is still, behind him like the ambience of a storm, breathing slowly enough that Will can feel the rage silently steaming off him. He turns on his heel, stalks toward the other end of the trailer, and Will blows air out of his pursed lips, letting the knife clatter to the countertop.

Hannibal has commandeered Will's minuscule bathroom, to shower and change, while Will preheats the small oven. It's a gas oven, Hannibal's preference, and Will can't remember if he was thinking of that when he moved in here.

"You called me your husband," says Hannibal when he has emerged from the small, steamy room in a cloud of eucalyptus, dressed in a white shirt and dark chinos that Will has prepared for him. "I must have forgotten the wedding, my apologies."

Will sighs, flicks a piece of onion-skin off his hand onto the chopping board. "It seemed fitting," he mumbles, and Hannibal comes up behind him. He smells clean, and his hair is slightly damp, falling forward to brush over the back of Will's head when he leans forward. His body is broad and warm, and Will puts down the paring knife to let Hannibal pick it up. So many months alone without Hannibal has dulled him, but his mind quickens. He stiffens in Hannibal's arms, watches helplessly as he picks up the cheap knife and turns it gently in his palm. His fingers are long and square, and the blade looks short and shiny against his pale skin. "How did you know that?" Will whispers.

Hannibal's arms tighten around him, and Will is a fool. He can see it now, flashing in his own memory, the yellow-greenish stains of weedy grass on the overlong trouser hems of that white jumpsuit. He watched Hannibal walk into his home, splattered with blood and grass stains, and he did not think of anything other than the fact that it was Hannibal walking into his home. He can imagine it, without wanting to, without meaning to, he sees Hannibal hide the car and walk to the trailer park. He can watch in his own overactive imagination as Hannibal stalks him, follows him to Jackson's trailer, hidden only by the scraggly trees and overgrown bushes. He must have been close, to hear Will speak. Perhaps he was on the other side of Jackson's trailer all along, listening to Will while the dew soaked up into his clothes, and the burrs embedded themselves into the fabric. Silent, still as any predator until Will walked away. Will had watched Jackson close his door, go to pack a bag through the frosted glass for only a moment before he had turned away.

The carrots smell fresh and woody and it's this that draws him out of his reverie. Hannibal's heart is slow and steady, he can feel it against his spine. He won't ask. He knows that is why Hannibal is waiting for him to speak, and so he stays silent. After a long, tense moment, Hannibal rubs his thumb along the spine of the knife handle, his skin shushing lightly along the cheap plastic.

"I didn't kill him," Hannibal tells him.

"He didn't deserve to die," Will says. "He didn't do anything wrong."

"No," Hannibal agrees. "He did nothing wrong. But I wished to end him, regardless."

"Why didn't you?"

"He is only a man," Hannibal tells him, and Will understands. Hannibal is a butcher, an artisan and an artist, and Jackson was no pig, no painting or sculpture. He turns in Hannibal's arms, feels the tip of the knife, blunted by disuse and neglect come up to the tender underside of his shaved skull. There's a tiny divot there where his spine enters his skull, and it's that hollow Hannibal rests the tip of the knife in. Will looks up slightly, just enough to see the maroon-brown of Hannibal's eyes, his pupils wide in the dimness of the sinking sun. It moves the blade into his skin enough to sting, but not to cut.

Hannibal kisses him, and he tastes like Will's toothpaste and fascination. When Will lifts his hands to Hannibal's arms, his palm drifts upward to his shoulder, and his fingertips find a ladder of scars along his upper shoulder blade. Remnants of scars from the window Will shoved him from. He places his hand down on the countertop, to steady himself as he touches the proof of Hannibal's fall, and that is his mistake. At first all he feels is cold, as though he placed his hand onto a block of ice instead of his countertop. Then it stings, then all of a sudden the pain rips him open, and he's gasping, his head jerking to the side to see the knife embedded through the back of his hand, shoved so deep it's jammed in the formica. Hannibal is holding him by the waist with his free hand, and Will sags in his grasp, inhaling sharp and deep.

He hasn't screamed, taken with shock, and so Hannibal gently twists the blade, shredding the insides of his hand, grinding metal against the fine metacarpals. Will's mouth is open, and for a moment he thinks it's to scream, but it isn't. He surprises himself, but not Hannibal when he rears back to bite him. Hannibal jerks his head to the side, just enough so that Will can't reach his throat, can only bury his teeth in the meat of his chest. Hannibal pulls out the knife in response.

"You've prepared such a lovely meal," Hannibal tells him, and for a moment Will is terrified, the glint of the blade in his eyes, a bucket of ice dumped in his gut and stunning his teeth loose from Hannibal's skin. "But I'm afraid we really must leave. They will be looking for me. Are you coming?"

Relief pours into him, and Hannibal's blood cools and sets on his mouth, flaking against his teeth. He breathes out slowly, the adrenaline from the wound leaking from him slow and his blood soaks into the vegetables. Hannibal has not bothered to put pressure on his own wound, instead he is picking up a tea towel and winding it firmly around Will's hand.

"Would you let me stay?" He asks, and his tongue is sticky with Hannibal's blood.

Hannibal doesn't answer, but Will can see the truth in his face, a restraint and some strange sadness. Hannibal presses his wounded hand upwards, above his heart to slow the bleeding. Hannibal would leave him here, Will understands, would leave him be in this empty trailer park with the birds and Winston, and the boat engines and humid air if Will wanted it. Instead, Will opens the hot oven, throws the blood-soaked towel into it. He leaves it open, allows the gas flame to lick up his blood and along the fabric, to the chipboard wood of the cabinet, some curious animal venturing out of its box.

"I'll come with you," Will says.

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